Gilding the lily

This year’s Dale Chihuly exhibit has to stand its own against a lush growing season at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.

By Emma Trelles
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Dale Chihuly can’t quite discern any profound reason he has returned to Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden. Speaking over the phone from his Seattle studio, he cites the cool, sunlit beauty of South Florida’s winter months, praises the clarity of its skies. But in the end, his decision to seed 15 sprawling glass installations throughout the garden for the second year in a row was rooted in nothing more than impulse.

“I don’t know what it was. Normally, we wouldn’t do that,” he explains. “I’ve been asked before to have repeat shows, and even years later I wouldn’t do it. But Fairchild asked and I sort of thought about it. I thought we could freshen it up with new pieces and change location of some of the others. They got me at a good moment. And it is a nice garden.”

Quiet beauty

Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden unfolds its stunning greenery across 83 acres in Coral Gables. The garden is laced with lakes, a 2-acre tropical rain forest and more than 400 species of palms. It is the world center of cycads, which predate dinosaurs and are considered the oldest plant group on the planet.

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Fairchild's beauty is the quiet sort, and in order to raise this nonprofit's profile, both with locals and with tourists, a bit of flair was in order, a crystalline shot of the theatrical. This is what Fairchild staff and board members hoped for when Chihuly unveiled his works last year during the artist's first show at the garden.

And they got it: Visitor attendance billed from the average 125,000 to 300,000 during the exhibit's December to May run. The garden swung open its doors for Tropical Chihuly Nights, and 40,000 entered to see the confection of glass illuminated in shadow. Garden membership spiked from 22,000 to 35,000. The event was a windfall of funding and fame.
"Chihuly has dramatically changed people's perception of Fairchild," notes Dr. Mike Maunder, executive director of the garden. "What he's brought to it was a sense of excitement and drama."

**Art and flowers**

This year's exhibit boasts some surprises amid the familiar. Repeat visitors will recognize the Red and Amber Reeds staked in the Madagascar forest and the planet-shaped Niijima Floats bobbing in the Victoria amazonica pool.

Patrons will also come across two wholly new works: The Sun, a wild tangle of glass measuring 14 feet in height and diameter, and crafted from 1,000 separate components; and The Neon Tower, which peaks at 26 feet high and contains 3,000 feet of neon. The latter piece is perfectly reflected in the nearby water, and at night both sculptures burn with light.

Also reconfigured are the works interspersed within the conservatory -- Chihuly's Macchias are now set upon pedestals before a royal blue wall studded with mossy planters. A host of glass flowers resembling stretchy anthuriums are now potted in glossy jugs. This year the garden holds its own against the finery -- a strong growing season without hurricanes has dissolved the borders between the glass and the green, painting the garden as a living kind of artistry.

The freshest element to the collection is Fairchild's own offering -- nine sculpture installations that inaugurate the first year of its official "Art and Flowers" program. Even before the pageantry of Chihuly, the garden offered art showings, such as Daisy Youngblood's bronze Standing Gorilla or the thousands of poppy-colored flags Patricia Van Dalen planted in the lowlands.

**Odes to the earth**

After last year's Chihuly exhibit, the avalanche of requests by artists and galleries to show at the garden prompted Fairchild to expand its aims and curate its own collection, a melange of works that tie into the garden's mission of conservation and education.

"A lot of my work deals with the ideas of science and genetics and technology," says artist Joshua Levine, who is now based in Los Angeles but grew up on Miami Beach. His piece Xenopus Tropicalis Transmutation holds 300 frogs made of rubber materials, with each toad proffering six legs instead of the typical four. Ensnconced along the fat branch of an oak, Levine's work addresses amphibian extinction as well as the outcomes of genetic manipulation.

"It's the kind of frog that's been bred in labs for use in experiments," Levine says. "Frogs are kind of the canary in the coal mine, so to speak."

Levine's piece is the only one commissioned by Fairchild, but the garden does earn a percentage of the sales of all works of art. Last year, 350 Chihuly commemorative studio pieces were snapped up at an average of $5,000 per small-scale sculpture. This season the garden has already sold its first work from the "Art and Flowers" exhibit -- Ursula Von Rydingsvard's River Bowl, a tower of cedar intricately pieced together. The work is an ode to the disappearing timber and wild forests across the globe, and one can smell its rich scent from a few feet away.

Closer to home, Miami-based artist Wendy Wischer collaborated with her advance sculpture students at the New World School of the Arts to make Creeping Lightly, an installation that winds its way throughout the almost 600 feet of the garden's Vine Pergola. Artist-made leaves and insects flutter between the trumpet creeper and the Florida dutchman's pipe. A spider web made of Christmas tree lights fans out beside the walkway; a cluster of white spheres hangs grape-like over bark. Walking beneath this shaded stretch of vine and art offers a calming solitude, a welcome separateness from the city.

"There is a history to the pergola," says Wischer. "It's kind of an oasis, the secret of the garden. It's a place that provides shade and shelter, where people could hide away."

Emma Trellis can be reached at 954-356-4689 or etrelles@sun-sentinel.com.
on view

What: "Chihuly at Fairchild" and "Art and Flowers"

Where: Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, 10901 Old Cutler Road, Coral Gables

When: Through May 31; open 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. daily, and 6 to 9:30 p.m. Thursdays

Admission: Adults $20; seniors $15, children ages 6 to 17 $10, and children 5 and younger free. Audio tours in English and Spanish for $5. Tropical Chihuly Nights: Adults $30, children ages 6 to 17 $20 and children 5 and younger free.

Information: 305-667-1651 or fairchildgarden.org